

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Jan van der Straet STRADANUS (Bruges 1523 - Florence 1604)

The Head of Saint John the Baptist

Oil, over an underdrawing in black chalk and possible traces of pen and ink, on paper laid down on canvas. 418 x 278 mm. (16 3/8 x 10 7/8 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE GROENINGEUSEUM, BRUGES.

Formerly given to the Bolognese painter Bartolommeo Passarotti (1529-1592), this oil sketch on paper was later attributed to the Sienese artist Francesco Vanni (1563/64-1610). More recently, however, it has been convincingly attributed to Stradanus by Alessandra Baroni, it has been suggested by Baroni that this oil sketch was part of a presentation cartoon for Stradanus's large altarpiece of The Baptism of Christ, signed and dated 1572, in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. One of the finest altarpieces by Stradanus, this large painting on panel was commissioned from the artist by the Mazzinghi Baccelli family for their chapel in Santa Maria Novella, and became one of the artist's best known works, despite its somewhat damaged state for much of its later history. The fame of The Baptism of Christ led to its reproduction, with several significant differences, in a large engraving by Philips Galle, published around 1580.

In a recent scholarly article devoted to this oil sketch, which is the only known preparatory study by Stradanus for this important painting, Baroni comments on its high quality: 'Here, in the sheet with the head of the Baptist, the features of the saint are well lit, lighter and more distinct even if softened by a

fluid and smooth brushstroke. The preparation on the paper is thin, but apparently rich in texture; the drawing in black chalk is precise and meticulous, and is clearly evident beneath the colour applied in a transparent manner.' While the head of Saint John the Baptist in this oil sketch is nearly identical to that in the Santa Maria Novella altarpiece, there are several significant differences between the present sheet and the final painting, such as the positioning of the saint's drapery of leopard skin and the hair falling onto the right shoulder of the saint, which is more abundant in the painting. Nevertheless, in this oil sketch, 'The face, the neck, the eminent shape of the nose, and even the shadows that sweetly play over the soft surfaces of the masculine face of the Baptist are, however, completely analogous [with the painting]. The subtle touches of colour on the cheeks and lips, which in the painting accentuate the pathos of the saint's mouth, half open in pronouncing the solemn sacramental blessing, are, in the drawing, canceled in the few thin lines of black chalk and oil colour, which would almost certainly suggest the inspiration of a real model.'

A recent restoration of the altarpiece of The Baptism of Christ has revealed the painter's signature and the date 1572: 'IOANES STRATENSIS / FLANDRVS PICTOR / FACIEBAT 1572'. The panel is painted over a preparation consisting only of a thin layer of gypsum mixed with animal glue, and in some parts of the surface the underdrawing is visible. Furthermore, as Alessandra Baroni has noted of the painting, in the course of its restoration, 'some obvious traces of the cartoon have been found. There are often fragments of thick paper along the external edges of the panel, an area that also shows the typical cuts made when a knife is used to remove the thick paper of the cartoon used to transfer the composition to the surface. The Baptism of Christ has been painted almost directly onto the surface layer prepared with chalk without any preparation underneath. The supporting panels are made of rough, crudely cut wood, which explains why the condition of the great painting deteriorated so quickly... The quality of the painting is particularly high. There is a lively use of colour that has been blended with the surface with incredible mastery considering that there is only a thin layer of chalk underneath.'

The head of the Baptist in this oil sketch on paper is the same size as that in the painting, and Baroni has plausibly suggested that the present sheet was part of a larger, finished presentation cartoon of the composition (known as a 'ben finito cartone'), to be shown to the patrons for their approval before work on the painting was begun. This drawing may have been trimmed from such a presentation cartoon, which were often carefully preserved; as has recently been noted, 'The creation of cartoons required a certain level of artisanal skill in addition to a mastery of draftsmanship. Cartoons were labor-intensive and not inexpensive to produce.'

A comparison between the present sheet and the heads of three members of the Baccelli family, donors of the painting, at the centre right edge of the altarpiece, is telling. The heads in the painting display the same readily visible underdrawing in black chalk that is found in the oil sketch. This would suggest that the donor portraits were added to the painting at a late stage of the creation of the work, after the preparation of the cartoon.

Baroni has also noted technical similarities between the present sheet and a small monochrome oil sketch of The Banquet of Cyrus the Great in the Uffizi, which is a study for a tapestry cartoon of 1567, as well as a composition drawing, also in the Uffizi, that is a preparatory study for an altarpiece of Christ Driving the Moneychangers from the Temple in the Florentine church of Santo Spirito, painted in 1572.

She further notes the distinct similarities in the physiognomy of Christ in the latter painting in Santo Spirito and the head of the Baptist in the present sheet, suggesting that the same model was used for both. Indeed, the head of Christ in the Santo Spirito Christ Driving the Moneychangers from the Temple is, in effect, a reversed version of the head of the Baptist in both this oil sketch and the painting in Santa Maria Novella.

As Alessandra Baroni notes of the present sheet, 'The black chalk is clearly evident and quite visible under the transparent colour... In this drawing the technique is absolutely in line with the graphic style of Stradanus in his preparatory drawings and cartoons for the paintings and tapestries of the sixties and seventies.' This splendid oil sketch of The Head of Saint John the Baptist, in her words, 'not only reunites a work of extraordinary beauty and rarity with the corpus of the Flemish artist's known works, but helps to further define the *modus operandi* of Stradanus.'

Provenance:

Anonymous sale, London, Sotheby's, 10 July 2003, lot 162 (as Bartolomeo Passarotti)
Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd., London, in 2004.

Exhibitions

New York and London, Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd., Master Drawings and Oil Sketches, 2004, no.12 (as Bartolomeo Passarotti); New York and London, Stephen Ongpin Fine Art, Master Drawings, 2014, no.4 (as Francesco Vanni).

Literature:

Peter Humfrey et al, The Age of Titian: Venetian Renaissance Art from Scottish Collections, exhibition catalogue, Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland, 2004, p.248, under no.106 (as Bartolomeo Passarotti), entry by Aidan Weston-Lewis; John Marciari, 'Francesco Vanni: Artistic Vision in an Age of Reform', in John Marciari and Suzanne Boorsch, Francesco Vanni: Art in Late Renaissance Siena, exhibition catalogue, New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, 2013-2014, p.7, fig.3 and p.87, under no.16 (as Francesco Vanni); Alessandra Baroni, 'Una proposta per lo Stradanus disegnatore', Paragone, September - November 2015, pp.49-58, illustrated in colour pl.44 (as Stradanus); Anna Bisceglia, 'Spazio ecclesiale e pale controriformate in Santa Maria Novella', in Riccardo Spinelli, ed., Santa Maria Novella: La basilica e il convento. 3. Dalla ristrutturazione vasariana e granducale ad oggi, Florence 2017, p.91, p.118, note 51.

Artist description:

A pupil of Peter Aertsen in Antwerp, Jan van der Straet became an independent master there in the early 1540's. Soon afterwards he travelled to Italy, and by 1545 had settled in Florence, where he worked for most of the remainder of his career. (Between 1550 and 1553 he worked in Rome, assisting Francesco Salviati on the decorations of the Vatican Belvedere.) Known in Italy as Giovanni Stradano, he joined the group of artists working on the extensive decoration of the Palazzo Vecchio under the supervision of Giorgio Vasari, whose principal assistant and collaborator he became. More than perhaps any other artist save Vasari, Stradanus's work dominated the decoration of the Palazzo Vecchio, and as well as contributing a large part of the fresco decoration of the apartments of Eleanor of Toledo and designing a number of tapestries, he also provided two paintings for the Studiolo of Francesco I de' Medici. He painted several altarpieces for Florentine churches remodelled by Vasari, notably at Santa Maria Novella, Santo Spirito and Santa Croce, where in 1564 he also contributed to the decoration of the tomb of Michelangelo.

Stradanus worked for the Medici throughout his career, creating over 130 cartoons for the Arazzeria Medicea, the tapestry factory founded by Duke Cosimo de' Medici in 1557. Among his most important tapestry commissions were a series of hunting scenes for the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano, executed in 1567. Following a visit to Antwerp around 1578, Stradanus began to design engravings, eventually producing a large number of drawings destined to be translated into prints. Many of his designs for prints were sent to Antwerp to be engraved, notably by the Galle family of printmakers and publishers. As one scholar has noted, 'It is as print designer and draftsman that he excelled...Hundreds of his designs – all engraved, published, and distributed throughout Europe by printmakers in Antwerp – attest to Stradanus's particular strength: his inventiveness in subject, composition, and disposition, all particularly well suited for the scale and scope of works on paper.' Significant groups of drawings by Stradanus are today in the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York (around 150 sheets, mainly designs for book illustrations) and the Uffizi, as well as the collection of the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, which contains a number of tapestry designs.